



Trees and trains act too



WIDE CANVAS: Adoor Gopalakrishnan

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

It was during one of my long sessions with the renowned Indian director, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, that I realised that non-human actors could be as important as flesh-and-blood men and women. Birds, animals, trees, cars and even trains have all played key roles in films. In his and in those of others.

Adoor, who creates cinema in his native Malayalam, once said that a movie “is not just an actor’s performance. He is only one of the several elements...I take care to include animals or birds or even insects in my films. Man becomes truly complete only with the interplay of life forms around him, including plants and trees. This is what makes him one with nature.”

True to this, “the street cat that strolls on the roof in *Swayamvaram* (*One’s Own Choice*), the naughty tuskers, and the black cow that chases Sankarankutty out of the shop veranda into lashing rain in *Kodiyettam* (*The Ascent*), different kinds of dogs and the hen that lays eggs in the attic in *Anantaram* (*Monologue*), the cranes, the crows, parrots, mynahs and a host of other birds, and the fish in the temple pond in *Vidheyam* (*The Servile*) are a few of these non-human actors which have made my movies richer with their presence and histrionics,” the auteur — whose works have enthralled audiences at home and abroad — averred.

Even more incredible was Adoor’s decision to make a palm tree a character in

Nizhalkkuthu (*Shadow Kill*), set in pre-independent India and during Gandhi’s Quit India Movement. (*Nizhalkkuthu* talks about a hangman in the princely state of Travancore, now part of Kerala, and his guilt-ridden existence — perhaps the only film to have tackled this aspect in a narrative about capital punishment.)

Adoor described — during my exhaustive discussions with him when I was writing his biography — how he had chanced upon this character. “I researched a lot about the life and practices of an executioner’s family settled in Tamil Nadu’s Nagercoil. The movie was the confluence of history, geography and all other factors of the period. It was not easy to locate a place that had the right ambience and appearance. We had to find a spot as it existed 60 years ago, one with huge rocky hills in the background with flowering Palmyra (palm) trees all around. But Kanyakumari district, where Nagercoil lies, had changed completely, with all signs of modernity visible just about everywhere.

“At last, we reached Pottalkulam, behind the Maruthva Malai (Medicinal Hill). We could not believe our eyes when we came across a small farm house that suited a hangman’s, and it served our purpose well. We carried out some repairs to give it the right look and feel. One evening, I had a unique experience. After the rain had stopped, I heard the flapping of the Palmyra leaves in the wind.

“The tap-tap sound made by the leaves appeared to be the very heartbeat of the house. Its melody struck a chord in me, causing both sorrow and joy at the same

time. This set me thinking, and soon I made changes in the script to include an additional character — the wind-driven Palmyra tree. It was a constant witness to the lives of the house’s inmates, a family that lived just outside the village and in social seclusion.”

There have been many others in Indian cinema who have used non-humans with great effect. Elephants and dogs have essayed major roles. The stone figures of gods and goddesses have replicated men and women with heroes and heroines talking to them, complaining to them — as if they were human beings.

Interestingly, Kannan’s *Oru Oorla Rendu Raja* (*Two Kings In One Country*) in Tamil — to soon go on the floors — will have a whole train as one of its characters. The helmer has hired a platform in Mayiladuthurai (earlier known as Mayavaram) railway station and a train for his movie. Kannan recently said the train would be a “character”.

Trains have been great leitmotifs in cinema — and they have been wonderful Cupids. Remember that song in *Professor* with Shammi Kapoor and Kalpana jumping in and out of the slow moving toy train as it chugs through Ghoom Loop, near Darjeeling (*Mein Chali, Mein Chali...*).

Remember Rajesh Khanna in a Jeep with Sharmila Tagore in a train in *Aradhana* with the evergreen number, *Meri Sapno Ki Rani...* And some of you will certainly have not forgotten one of Mani Ratnam’s best works, *Alaipayuthey* (*Waves*, which was remade in Hindi as *Saathiya* with Rani Mukherjee and Vivek Oberoi), starring Madhavan and Shalini. Here the train acts as Cupid. So, the

train in Kannan’s *Oru Oorla Rendu Raja* may well be an engaging part of the plot.

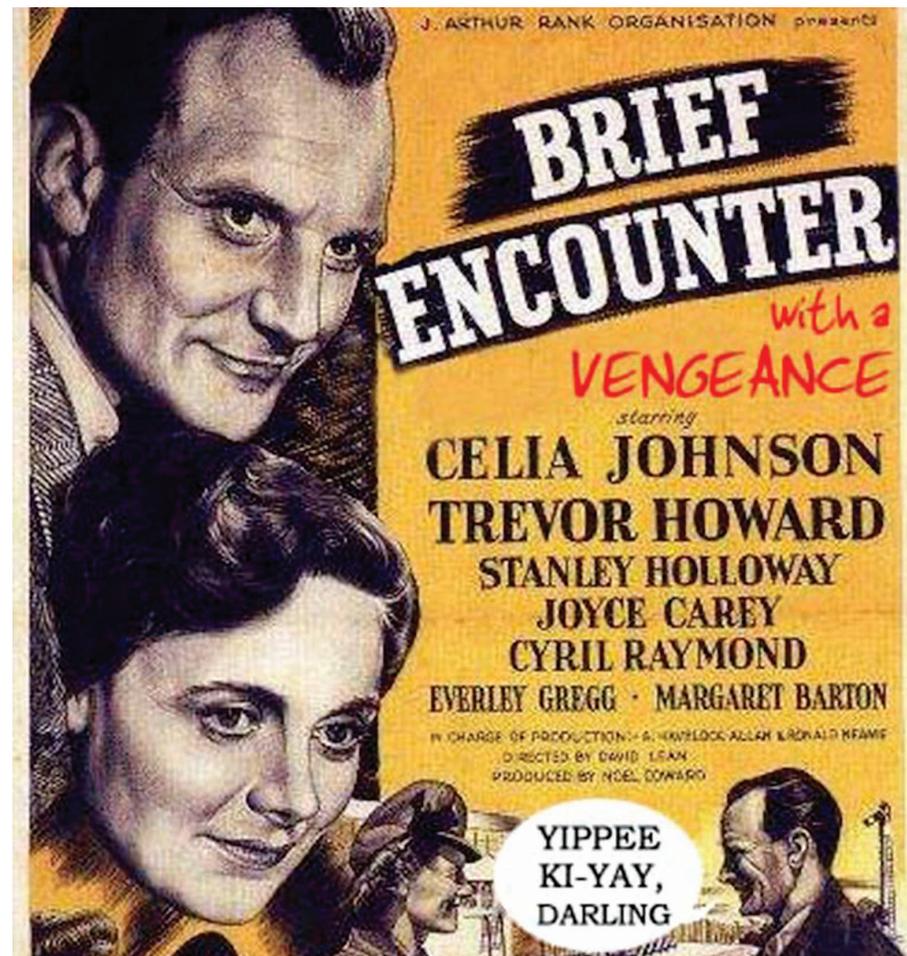
And trains, after all, have since time immemorial been so romantic. They have helped men and women meet, helped them to begin a love story. Nobody can forget David Lean’s great classic, *Brief Encounter* — where Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson — or rather the characters they essay — fall in love in a rail station with the story playing out against the whistle of the engines and the clanging sound of the bogies till the affair disappears in the smoke of the locomotives.

Sometimes, an estranged man-woman relationship is repaired in a train station as we saw in *Kora Kagaz* with Professor Suresh Dutt (Vijay Anand) and Archana Gupta (Jaya Bahaduri) romantically reconciling with each other one night in a railway waiting room.

But trains have also been used to spin a murder mystery; Alfred Hitchcock did that with panache in his 1951 *Strangers on a Train*. Sidney Lumet’s *Murder on the Orient Express* is based on an Agatha Christie novel, and is told with chilling precision. Long years ago, I read one of those mushy novels, *Brief Ecstasy*, where two strangers are thrown together in a train as it speeds towards Madrid under a star-spangled night. The mood can only be for love then, not murder.

So, it will be interesting to see how Kannan uses the train to weave his tale of two kings in (maybe) one train.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran wrote a full length biography of Adoor Gopalakrishnan a few years ago, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com



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